

# Yellow is the Saddest Color

Elizabeth Romero

**Abstract:** Elizabeth “Liz” Romero is a Southern California native, currently pursuing her bachelor’s in English at California State University, Los Angeles. In “Yellow is the Saddest Color,” Liz reminisces on her turbulent college journey: losing her beloved uncle, the COVID pandemic, her suicide attempt, and most importantly, her epiphany about what it means to be a good student. **Content Advisory:** This narrative contains content that may be upsetting to readers, including references to self-harm and suicidal ideation.

On my father’s fifty-second birthday, we took a quick trip to Burbank to visit my aunt, uncle, and their two young boys. That Saturday we’d be hosting a party, celebrating my eighteenth birthday and high school graduation. The boys were playing video games, and my little sister joined them shortly after. The adults and almost-adult (me) stuck around in the living room.

My uncle—I’ve always referred to him as just *Tío*—was lying on the couch, struggling to keep his eyes open. My parents teased him for it, even his wife. As a computer geek, he was always on a chair, but never a couch potato. Eventually, he got up on the couch to grab some beers from the fridge, you know, so he and my dad could share a birthday drink.

I was on my laptop, scrolling through the Cal State LA homepage, getting more information for freshman orientation the following day. I remember not wanting to go. I just wanted to stay with them like I usually did, get my party organized, and watch shows with him and my aunt and talk smack. *Tío* saw that the homepage had the Word apps and offered to download them onto my laptop for me.

I thanked him, and shortly after we left, but I never gave him a hug. I’d see him that Saturday for my party. We’d give each other as many hugs as we wanted then.

The next day, the Burbank sky would be a fantastic blend of faded pink, purple, and yellow hues, more beautiful than any summer sunset I’d ever seen, but he would be gone.

\* \* \*

My college journey as a first-generation student has literally been shaken up with loss. On the very first day of the new chapter of my life, *Tío* passed away. Though so young he always had a bad heart, so the cause of death shouldn’t have been a shock. Yet like any loss, we’re never prepared for it. We’d always been close and grew closer in his last months, and, looking back, he knew he had to make the most of it. My college experience, which obviously includes my family, would be missing one of my biggest supporters.

For the next four semesters, my college life progressed. My only breaks were during the summer and winter. My only C so far was for the only math class I’d have to take in college. My professors, oblivious to my situation, praised and complimented my work, even if I left with Bs in some of their classes. Two semesters—including our sudden transition to lockdown—I pulled off straight As.

The pandemic struck. The months tolled. I was staying in Burbank with my widowed aunt and my two young cousins for a while, but like a balloon that had been untied, I slowly

started to deflate. Going inside forced me to reflect on everything, and it made me realize how much I'd pushed and *pushed* to be the glowing student everyone always expected me to be.

*Should I push myself even further?*

Tío's anniversary passed that summer and all I can remember from that week was eating pasta every night. On my birthday, we released yellow balloons in his honor. Yellow had been his favorite color, you see, and in these yellow balloons, we wrote messages for him on the other side.

After an awkward reunion between former friends, I eventually returned home. The remainder of my summer break was one hot blur, sitting in front of the computer screen desperately applying for jobs and with very little motivation to write. It was okay. Returning to my first home was probably for the best.

My third year in college—exclusively indoors, online, with very little social contact—was around the corner anyway. I got a job that was walking distance from my home, a perfect excuse to make extra money and get a distraction, but as the first one in the family going to college (and intending to stay there), I was determined to keep on going.

\* \* \*

I first thought about killing myself in September of 2020. It was fleeting, an idea that didn't really consume my thoughts at first. Like a fly you can just swat away. I wrote a note, one that might be sitting in one of my desk drawers presently but left it there. One Sunday, home alone, I was eating a pineapple popsicle and watching *Glee*, but I wasn't really watching *Glee*. Instead, I was pondering how I'd do it, what would be faster and the least painful, and the popsicle melted in my hand by the time my father arrived home.

Finals were coming up, anyway, so I pushed the thought out of the way and kept my focus on my studies. Tío would totally kick my face if he saw me hanging around in the afterlife with him.

Spring semester kickstarted with my parents finally going their separate ways and I only felt lonelier than ever. I was a vegan then, but my diet went from decent to disastrous. I saw my friends and they knew I wasn't all there—I even made a joke about “getting skinnier” from depression—but I seemed to get them not to worry. My mom knew about my suicide note but after one conversation we never talked about it again. I saw my usual therapist through Zoom and went to work. In my personal life, I made silly mistakes, mistakes that could be analyzed as a form of self-destruction, and I was miserable, but at least I wasn't thinking about killing myself.

Online classes drained me. Turning on the laptop was tedious enough and staring at the screen only made me want to collapse against the keyboard. Everything that I got into my head felt forced and my work felt mediocre but fuck it, *I had one more year to go*.

The perseverance I'd built over the last few years had been severed. A wave of loneliness I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy began to eat at me. March was the final straw. I stopped showing up to classes, bailed on some assignments, and completed work at the last minute—*literally*. School had no purpose, and the future didn't seem real to me because the present barely did. The past felt like another world—everything before Tío didn't feel real. If I weren't working, I would lie in my bed and that was literally it. I napped when I could and ate very little. Walking to work, watching the same shows, and writing exhausted me. Everything exhausted

me, really. That first fly became a swarm of them, hovering over me, and there really didn't feel like a reason to swat.

Towards the end of March, either the very last day of the month or April Fools', I went for it. Before I could do anything, my mom grabbed it out of my hands. Both she and my older sister convinced me that I needed to get some real help. My dad came over and with my mom, they took me to the Kaiser Clinic. When I got on the scale, I was one hundred and eleven pounds—borderline underweight for someone my size. The doctors properly diagnosed me with depression, but I also learned I had freaking COVID, but of course, was asymptomatic. I was observed within the six feet distance for the next twenty-four hours by multiple nurses and doctors, and at the last minute, decided that I wouldn't go to psychiatry. Instead, I returned to Burbank, to the spare room I regularly stayed in.

Then I went home, went to work, and fell asleep.

A week later, I was back in school. Yes, I withdrew from a class, but I managed to *literally* survive the semester. So, I decided that maybe, just *maybe*, I needed a break from school. Tío would understand. Right?

A year later, I'm back. I'm part-time right now but I'm doing a lot better. Returning to the classroom, especially after lockdown and taking the fall semester off, feels intimidating. I'm not the same student I once was when I started, mourning but chirpy with my lessons. Now I'm just present. Sometimes I'll be a chameleon amongst the students who may be in a situation like mine, or, worse yet, I feel the world watching me, as if they *know*. But the first step—simply being there—can already be tough enough. Especially for this last rough year I had. Sometimes I'll poke fun at the traumatic events that took place last year—being gifted yellow “grippy socks,” unable to sleep properly inside a chilly bright room where you're being monitored, receiving my own toilet due to my positive test, being followed around by security like a Kardashian might—but something I've also gained from last year, my college experience so far, wouldn't just be perseverance, but also acceptance.

Yellow, yellow, yellow. A color so bright should give me hope, a reason to start again, to bloom into something stronger, and it has, but yellow is also the saddest color because it also reminds me of everything I've lost.

I don't think Tío would care as much for me graduating within four years as he would about my well-being if he were here. When you lose someone, it can be overwhelming to fulfill their expectations. Sometimes we're so busy trying to appease the ones we've lost that we never stop to see how we're doing ourselves. Hell, we need to ask ourselves if we're even honoring them if our own lives are miserable. The distractions are only temporary, and if we're still feeling like shit, can we really be honoring them as they deserve to be?

Anyways, I should really lay some yellow flowers down the next time I see him.